

American

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U.S. Volunteers in Indonesia Answer President Obama's Call to Service

President energized community action, Peace Corps director says

By Jim Fisher-Thompson
Staff Writer

Washington — When President Obama steps off his plane on a visit to Indonesia, he will be greeted by a cheering group of American volunteers who recently answered his call to community service, says Peace Corps Director Aaron Williams.

"I don't think there is any doubt that President Obama's call to service has energized Americans to volunteer in communities both in the United States and abroad," Williams told America.gov March 11 — 10 days before the president's visit to Guam, Indonesia and Australia is scheduled to begin.

Indonesia, where President Obama attended school from 1967 to 1971, recently welcomed a contingent of 25 Peace Corps volunteers who will work as English teachers in secondary schools and teacher training institutions after they have finished local language education and cultural training in the country.

In a meeting about a month ago, Williams said Obama was "extraordinarily enthusiastic about the Peace Corps and opportunities for it to grow. Because of his background rooted in community service, he has an understanding of how Americans can help others and is obviously committed to global engagement."

Before he entered politics, Obama worked as a community organizer, tackling legal and development issues for civic action groups in impoverished neighborhoods of Chicago. In April 2009, he signed a law to increase the number of volunteer opportunities in community service agencies supported by the government from 75,000 to more than 140,000.

Obama's youth and vigor also have played a large role in energizing the Peace Corps and its supporters, Williams said. "In 2009, our applications were up significantly. We got 15,000 for 12,000 volunteer jobs," and the agency's budget for 2010 was increased to \$400 million — a record appropriation by Congress.

Since the Peace Corps was established by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, 200,000 volunteers have served two-year stints teaching English, working with farmers and serving on health care teams in 139 developing countries.

Currently, 7,600 volunteers serve in 76 nations, 16 of them Muslim-majority countries, according to Allison Price,

director of communications for the Peace Corps. Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population, and Sierra Leone are the two most recent countries to accept Peace Corps volunteers, she added.

Williams, a former volunteer who served in the Dominican Republic from 1967 to 1970 and later a top official at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), was sworn in as the corps' 18th director in August 2009. He is the second African-American and fourth returned volunteer to head the volunteer agency.

Speaking from his own experiences as a trainer of teachers in the Dominican Republic more than 40 years ago, Williams said, "I learned that when people live and work together for a common goal, we can achieve great things, and today the Peace Corps continues to provide the bridge to accomplish great things around the world, person to person, community by community."

That is especially true now in the agency's growth into Muslim countries, Williams said. "Overall, I think it's important that Americans know more about the Muslim world, and they [Muslims] need to know more about America. Peace Corps provides a wonderful bridge for peoples of different cultures and backgrounds to interact and get to know each other, and so we continue to look for ways to expand into Muslim countries."

Kazakhstan is another Muslim-majority nation where more than 1,040 Peace Corps volunteers have served during the past 17 years and where 165 volunteers now work in education and community assistance programs. Williams said he met with visiting Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev in February and discussed how the program in his country could be expanded.

Here again, President Obama has had an energizing effect, Williams pointed out. "If you look at his speech in Cairo [June 4, 2009], he reached out to the Muslim world," promising a relationship based on mutual respect and understanding.

"The interests we share as human beings are far more powerful than the forces that drive us apart," Obama explained. "Part of this conviction is rooted in my own experience. I am a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims. As a boy, I spent several years in Indonesia and heard the call of the azaan at the break of dawn and the fall of dusk. As a young man, I worked in Chicago communities where many found dignity and peace in their Muslim faith."

Therefore, "there must be a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground," the president concluded.

Senator Offers Financial Reform Bill Despite Uncertain Outlook

Washington — Financial reform reappears on the congressional agenda as a key senator attempts to break an impasse in efforts to make the U.S. financial system less prone to crisis.

Christopher Dodd, a Democratic and chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, unveiled on March 15 a bill (PDF, 209KB) that would rein in large financial institutions by imposing new requirements on their size, their capital reserves and the complexity of their financial products. The bill would regulate for the first time derivative financial products. It also calls for redefining the powers of financial regulators, particularly the Federal Reserve, the U.S. central bank, and for giving the government authority to take over and dismantle troubled financial institutions that pose a risk to the entire financial system.

Dodd's stance has evolved under pressure from the administration and in response to arguments by regulators, analysts and Republican members of his committee. For example, his bill would keep regulation of the country's largest financial institutions at the Federal Reserve, give it a leading role in monitoring the financial system for signs of potential instability and make it the host for a new consumer financial-protection agency. A legislative proposal Dodd released in November 2009 had called for a more limited role at the central bank.

The House of Representatives approved in December 2009 its own version of financial reform legislation (PDF, 23KB), although the bill drew a "no" vote from every Republican member.

The Senate bill has no Republican support either. Dodd had vowed to work with Republican members to produce a bipartisan bill. But his negotiations with the ranking Republican member of the committee, Senator Richard Shelby, fell through, and later talks with another Republican senator, Bob Corker, progressed only slowly.

The public frustration with Wall Street and what many Americans view as the government's lack of action to address the sources of the financial crisis have been building since the government bailed out several financial institutions such as AIG, an insurance giant, and banker Citigroup.

President Obama referred to these feelings when he said in a prepared statement March 15: "We cannot wait any longer for real financial reform that brings accountability to the financial system and makes sure that the American taxpayer is never again asked to bail out the irresponsibility of our largest banks and financial

institutions." He welcomed the Dodd bill, which he said "provides a strong foundation to build a safer financial system."

For a financial reform bill to become law, the Senate must pass this bill (or any other bill that emerges from the banking committee). Then, the House and Senate versions must be reconciled before the president could sign legislation into law.

Dodd needs all Democratic votes and at least one Republican vote to ensure passage of the bill by the Senate. The senator told the *Washington Post* that his legislation incorporates compromises he reached with Corker, a Republican.

Corker acknowledged that much in his statement, but added that Dodd's bill contains some policies he cannot support. The power and placement of a consumer agency in the regulatory structure continues to be the most controversial issue of the financial reform. Republican committee members also expressed concern about the legislative schedule Dodd wants to follow. He said he will try to get the measure approved by the committee and ready for action by the entire Senate by the end of the week. Shelby called the schedule "unrealistic," and said the rush "undercuts the potential for bipartisan agreement."

Some interest groups — ranging from the American Bankers Association to Americans for Financial Reform — have expressed dissatisfaction with different aspect of the legislation, often for different reasons.

If the bill is approved by the Senate, legislators will face the challenge of resolving differences between the Senate and House versions.

However, Representative Barney Frank, the Democratic chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, who shepherded the separate financial reform bill through the House, played down those differences in a March 15 statement.

U.S., Haiti Experts Plan to Rebuild Medical Education System

January earthquake killed 73 doctors and nurses, damaged 30 hospitals

By Cheryl Pellerin
Science Writer

Washington — More than 60 officials and medical-education experts from Haiti and the United States met in Washington March 15 to plan a strategy for shoring up Haiti's devastated medical-education system and over time rebuilding the system to 21st-century standards.

Among the more than 250,000 who died as a result of the 7.0-magnitude earthquake that struck near Port-au-Prince January 12 were 73 doctors, nurses and other health care providers. Thirty of Haiti's 62 hospitals were severely damaged and more than 500 medical students are unable to finish their studies.

Haiti's most urgent needs, said Dr. Gabriel Thimothe, director-general of Haiti's Ministry of Health, include temporary or prefabricated buildings, training for emergency physicians, help getting medical students back in school, and psychological support for some of Haiti's most beleaguered citizens.

"One challenge we are facing now," Thimothe said, is "to provide psychological support to more than 4,000 people [with mental disorders]. Mental health was not a priority for the Ministry of Health but now it's a critical issue to be addressed."

For the nearly 10 million people in Haiti, he added, there are two doctors per 10,000 people and only 1.8 nurses. Fewer than 300 newly trained doctors per year graduate from medical school, and many leave to practice medicine in countries where salaries are higher.

Part of what is needed in Haiti, said Dr. Rubens Pamies, a meeting co-chair and vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, is to rebuild educational and treatment facilities with the technical backbone to accommodate 21st-century treatment and education, including telemedicine.

COMMITMENT TO REBUILD

The meeting, hosted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health, arose from discussions with physicians in the Haitian diaspora about the devastation to Haiti's medical-education system and the great loss of life among its doctors, nurses and medical and nursing students.

Attendees included U.S. and Haitian government officials — including Raymond Joseph, Haitian ambassador to the United States, and Laura Petrou, chief of staff in the office of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius — medical education and training leaders, physicians from U.S. academic health centers and historically black colleges and universities, and representatives of nongovernmental organizations.

Bringing greetings from Secretary Sebelius, Petrou added, "Since the earthquake President Obama asked us to pool our resources to do everything we could to be helpful. Hosting this meeting is just one small thing we'd like to do to give you the opportunity to talk together and try to address these problems."

During the meeting, the experts shared recent experiences and explored short- and long-term needs and strategies for rebuilding Haiti's medical education and training system, including acute and urgent needs, undergraduate and graduate medical education, infrastructure building, long-term needs and future collaborations. The experts also began work on a system that will help coordinate the broad range of international help on the ground in Haiti.

"We all appreciate very much the need to transition to recovery and to building a long-term, very sustainable infrastructure for health and health care in Haiti," said Dr. Nicole Lurie, HHS assistant secretary for preparedness and response. "Certainly medical education and health professions education is a huge part of that, and the losses to the medical education system in Haiti make that even more important."

NEXT STEPS

At the end of the day-long meeting, said Dr. Garth Graham, HHS deputy assistant secretary for minority health, the experts agreed on a collaborative approach to rebuilding across schools of medicine, public health and allied health professions such as nursing and pharmacy. The group also agreed on the need to engage other nongovernmental and philanthropic organizations for resource support.

"At the end of the meeting, participants agreed to form steering work groups for undergraduate education, graduate education and systems and infrastructure building," Graham said. "These three work groups will continue to develop and refine plans and strategies."

A key outcome, he added, was an agreement to work collaboratively to implement strategies formulated during the meeting.

"We have to move forward despite this tragedy," Thimothe told the attendees. "What I hope is that we can work with all of you around the table, all the universities and agencies that have an effective and quick response to needs which are very critical in Haiti. With this strong partnership, this commitment, we can move forward in Haiti."

U.S. Geological Survey to Help Devise Climate Adaptation Projects

Researchers seek remedies for changing ecosystems

By Karin Rives
Staff Writer

Washington — The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) has unique knowledge of how rising global temperatures are affecting America's natural resources. Lately, USGS scientists have been tapped to also help devise strategies

that will help nature adapt to climate change.

A number of USGS climate adaptation projects aimed at protecting the nation's natural resources against ecological havoc are under way – and efforts to boost funding for such work is an indication of how significant this new mandate has become.

President Obama asked for an \$8 million budget increase in fiscal year 2011 for USGS' National Climate Change and Wildlife Science Center, the office that handles much of the agency's climate adaptation work. If approved by Congress, the new money will be used to create five regional climate-science centers where USGS scientists will work directly with natural resource managers on climate-change-response strategies.

The first such center is slated to open in April at the University of Alaska in Anchorage. The government will invite bids from institutions or organizations interested in forming climate science centers in the Pacific Northwest and the southeastern part of the United States.

The president also requested \$1 million in additional funding to help USGS develop new partnerships and train new scientists to work on climate adaptation.

"This is a very broad mission in all our regional centers that's been ramped up over the last two or three years," said Douglas Beard, the National Climate Change and Wildlife Science Center's interim chief. "These are on-the-ground projects to address the needs of our partner agencies. We hear a lot from them on adaptation and they're asking for our help."

In one Alaska project, for example, USGS scientists are trying to project how plankton and, in turn, fish will be affected when glaciers that hold fresh water melt and the chemistry of the ocean water changes. This will help management agencies anticipate resource changes and perhaps change fishery rules to address expected increases or declines.

Rising temperatures can also affect what time flowers bloom, and whether or not breeding birds have enough to eat. Another Alaska project is focusing on that. "So if you're managing a critical bird habitat, you might want to put in a refuge to better protect such birds," Beard said.

Another study in the Navajo Nation in the southwestern United States focuses on the movement of sand dunes, and how this affects plants that people and animals on the Native American reservation in northern Arizona depend on. With the area growing hotter and drier, plants that keep the sand dunes in place have difficulty growing, causing the dunes to shift. This makes it harder for new plants to take root.

"By studying climate change impacts to sand dunes we can identify strategies for keeping sand dunes more stable, we can identify which plants need to be protected, and what kind of plants may tolerate dune mobility enough to be used in revegetation programs," Margaret Hiza, the USGS scientist running the project, explained in a recent podcast.

As U.S. government agencies such as USGS focus more on helping people and animals adapt to climate change, they may face some setbacks along the way. The question going forward, Beard said, is what can – and cannot – be done to help nature adapt to rising temperatures.

USGS, like other government stewards of the United States' natural resources, has a mission to use science to find the best solutions out there. "Everybody's engaged," Beard said.

Other USGS climate adaptation projects under way:

- Investigation into how higher temperatures and less precipitation in arid and semi-arid regions of North America affect wetlands that serve as stopovers for migratory birds.
- Study of how temperature changes in streams in the northeastern United States affect the Atlantic salmon population, and projections of future salmon populations in managed fisheries.
- Research into how rising sea levels redistribute tidal salt marshes in the San Francisco Bay area. The results of the study will help the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plan future land acquisition to protect birds that depend on the marshes.

Robert Levinson: Still Missing in Iran

For Christine Levinson, the issue is getting a father back to his family

By Jeff Baron
Staff Writer

Washington – Christine Levinson says she has one main strategy to keep her sanity while trying to find her husband: "Every day, I wake up and hope that today is the day I hear that he is on his way home," she said.

It is one of the few things about Robert Levinson's disappearance from Iran's Kish Island that seems to make sense.

Levinson vanished three years ago, on the eve of his 59th birthday, at the end of a one-day visit to Kish Island in the middle of a business trip. He checked out of the Maryam Hotel as expected and caught a taxi for the short ride to the Kish airport but never boarded his flight to Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where he was due to reclaim luggage he had left at a hotel and take a plane for London.

Levinson, a U.S. citizen, had retired as an FBI agent in 1998, but he was still in the business of catching crooks: "He investigated cigarette smuggling and other criminal activities," Christine Levinson said. His clients were private companies, and his wife said this particular, expensive trip involved work for several of them, so she was unable to say what sent him to Kish. In any case, she said, he didn't go anywhere or do anything that should have gotten him in trouble: "My husband was a law-abiding citizen."

Nor does the Iranian government say Levinson broke the law or is under arrest. His wife said no one has come forward with evidence that he is being held by Iranian authorities or anyone else, or that he was injured or died on that day in March 2007. "In all this time, there is nothing that we have heard that says he is not alive and well somewhere," Christine Levinson said.

As soon as she realized her husband was missing, Levinson started making efforts to find him. After eight months, she retraced his steps and visited Kish Island. "The Iranians promised to investigate and let me know the results of their investigation, and I haven't heard back from them," she said.

So life has gone on for the Levinsons, but with an important difference. Among the couple's seven children, one has graduated from high school, one from college and one from graduate school in the three years Levinson has been gone. A granddaughter, Grace, was born a year ago and has yet to meet her grandfather. The youngest son, Douglas, who was 5 feet 2 inches (157 cm) tall when his father left, is 6 foot 4 (193 cm).

"He was 13 when Bob left, and now he's 16," Christine Levinson said. "He's had a tough time with Bob not being here. Every teenage boy needs his father."

An older daughter has become engaged to her longtime boyfriend. "He waited for a long time, waiting for Bob to come home, before he asked her to marry him," Levinson said. The wedding is planned for September; the bride, daughter Sarah Levinson, said in an open letter to the governments of the United States and Iran that she needs her father to walk her down the aisle. "My father needs to be home now to dance with me at my wedding, a once-in-a-lifetime event that no father should ever miss," she said.

Christine Levinson said the lack of diplomatic relations between the United States and Iran has complicated the effort to find her husband. But she said the U.S. government has been working through diplomats from Switzerland, which represents U.S. interests in Iran, to seek help from Iran.

A statement from the U.S. State Department March 9 on

the third anniversary of his disappearance says, "Mr. Levinson will remain a priority for the United States until he is reunited with his family."

The statement also calls on Iran to resolve the cases of five U.S. citizens detained in Iran: Joshua Fattal, Shane Bauer and Sarah Shourd, three hikers who strayed over the border from Iraq; Kian Tajbakhsh, an Iranian-American scholar and urban planner arrested after the disputed Iranian presidential election of June 2009; and Reza Taghavi, a retired U.S. businessman reportedly held without charges since May 2008.

Christine Levinson appealed for anyone who knows something about her husband's disappearance or whereabouts to contact U.S. or Swiss officials or the Levinson family through its Web site, www.helpboblevinson.com. She said that if Levinson does return, he'll have a hard time disappearing again: "My children said that he's not allowed to go out of the house without an escort," she said.

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